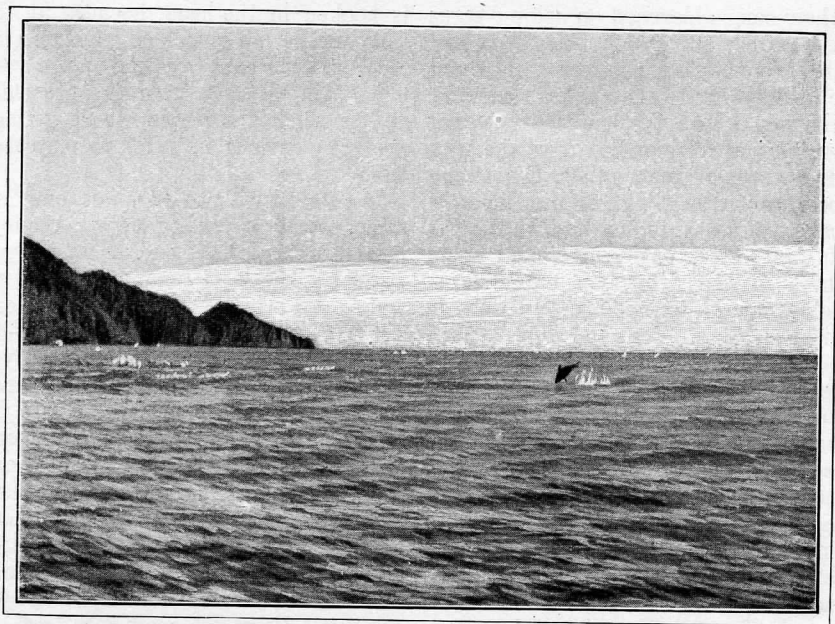


In its pursuit of flying-fish, the tuna leaps ten—often twelve—feet into the air to fall upon its victim. Occasionally such plunges carry the tuna over the boats of fishermen, and the possibility that they may strike and wreck the frail launches adds to the zest of the sport. From a photograph by Swenson.



ADVENTURES WITH THE LEAPING TUNA.

THE SKILL AND ENDURANCE REQUIRED TO CAPTURE "THE TIGER OF THE SEA."

BY CHARLES FREDERICK HOLDER,

Author of "Along the Florida Reef," "Half Hours with Nature," etc.

AMONG the many tales which come up from the sea none are more interesting, indeed sensational, than those relating to the capture of the great game fish, the leaping tuna, on the shores of Santa Catalina—"the Isle of Summer," as Southern Californians term it. The vision of this acrobat of the sea bursting from the water like an arrow, ten, yes, twelve feet into the air, has been mine on many occasions. I have seen him take his prey in mid-air, like an eagle; have watched him convert the Catalina sea, that had lain breathless, like a mirror of steel in the semi-tropic sun, into a maelstrom of surging waters; and have fought him, as he slowly towed my boat out to sea, hour after hour, until the lofty cliffs of the mountain-island were deep in gloom; and, finally, far on in the night have brought the game to gaff by the light of a lantern.

One of the singular facts about this mysterious fish is that it is caught with the rod only at Santa Catalina; and even there the sport seems to be confined within a space of about eight miles along the north shore of the island, never being seen nearer the mainland, which, with its snow-capped ranges, rises twenty miles away. The Vale of Avalon, which reaches from the bay of that name up into the mountains, is the headquarters of the famous Tuna Club, whose members, from every section of this country and even England, habitually fish here. The crescent bay, the lofty rocks, the tiers of hills merging into mountains, the blue haze and silvery flecks of fog, the deep blue of the sky and water, coupled with an almost perfect climate, winter and summer, make it an ideal spot for this adventurous sport. Around the crescent-shaped beach are the boatstands of

oarsmen, famous tuna gaffers, with reputations made on many a hard-fought field; boatmen as skilled as the Canadian *voyageurs*; their names blazoned on colored signs above the stands, by which float flags and signals bearing the magic figures of the tuna, or some device dear to the angler's heart.

He who would woo the leaping tuna that comes rushing into Avalon Bay from the deep sea, piling waves of foam in air, converting the waters into a swirling caldron, must be up betimes and a devotee of Eos, as the fish comes in from three until eight, and again from three in the afternoon until eight, never being caught at midday, and only in the months of May, June, and July. As a rule, the tuna stops biting all at once, sometimes between the 20th of July and the 1st of August. I have never known of but one being caught in August. We are on the beach so early that Vincente, the Venetian bait-catcher, is just taking the tuna bait from his gill-nets—great flying-fishes with four winglike fins. A dozen are tossed into the boat, which is then pushed off into the glassy bay and headed toward the horizon of vermilion clouds through which lighter rays are breaking—the advance guard of the rising sun.

The boat is tuna-rigged, and her name is "Fortuna." She is a yawl, with wide beam. The two anglers sit side by side in comfortable cushioned chairs facing the stern; behind them sits the boatman, who is also the gaffer. The rods and reels in tuna fishing are of the finest description—a single joint of noil wood, greenheart, or split bamboo, eight or nine feet long, with beautiful agate tips and guides; the handle of the butt wound with bamboo; and the left-hand grip, above the reel, of cork, held in place by silver bands. The reel is a big rubber and silver appliance, as nicely made as a watch and quite as expensive. It has a heavy leather thumb-brake and a patent anti-overrunning brake, and holds eight or nine hundred feet of a number twenty-one thread linen line that is a marvel of strength, yet a mere thread. The equipment costs perhaps—rod, \$25; reel, \$40; line, \$3.50; in all, \$68.50; and I dwell upon it because no large tunas were landed until the equipment was perfected. To the line is fastened a seven-foot piano-wire leader and a 10-0 hook.

The first and one of the most important features in tuna fishing is wetting the line. A dry line would be burnt off at the first pressure of the brake as the tuna struck. As the boatman rows out into the bay, we

unreel and soak the lines, then reel in, and the boatman fastens on the leader and the bait. The latter is a large flying-fish, and is hooked in the head, because at that the tuna strikes. We slack out the line a hundred feet, and the boat is rowed up the coast, not more than 150 feet from the rocky hills that rise perpendicularly everywhere, giving water perfectly smooth in which to play the gamy fish.

We soon have two rods out, one on either side. On each man's face expectancy is apparent, and perhaps one of us, since he has never yet caught a tuna, fingers his rod nervously and wonders secretly if he can land a fish. Suddenly a big dragon-fly-like object rises 200 feet to the left—a flying-fish flushed by a tuna. There is no mistaking the sign, and the blood surges into the face of the novice, as he hears the whisper of the boatman: "Look out, sir; they're coming!" The flyer comes steadily on, about three feet above the surface, and crosses the lines. Then a white wave hisses along, a hundred feet astern, and a dark body rises like an arrow into the air, turns gracefully, and falls upon the bait. Zip ze-eee-eee-z-zeee! and the steel throats of both of the big reels scream out an alarm that can be heard so far away that a companion angler, hearing it, waves his hat.

"You put on too much pressure, sir," says the boatman, as the novice gazes in amazement at his almost empty reel. He has lost his first tuna—how, is a mystery to him. But I have hooked mine; and listen to the reel as it now screams in a hysterical fashion, then sings in notes that tell every movement of the fish. Zee-zeee! it tears off the line. Fifty, one hundred, three hundred, four hundred feet gone! The boatman meanwhile is pushing the boat astern, getting it under way. Zee-zeee! Another hundred is torn away from the protesting reel, and yet I have been pressing on the leather brake with all my force. Six hundred feet of line the tuna has garnered in his first marvelous rush, before I can stop him. The reel is now silent, and the fish is towing the boat by the thread of a line—a fishing miracle.

All this has taken but a few moments. I drop back into my chair when the line slackens, then spring to my feet to see the first of a series of splendid tricks. The tuna is coming in, charging me like a bull in the ring. I can see his dorsal fin cutting the water as he flies along, and I reel with all my strength, the big multiplier eating up the line nobly. But no human power could

take in that 500 feet before the fish reaches the boat. There is still nearly 200 feet out when the tuna ends his sensational charge within a short distance of us, whirling about, throwing the spray high in air. Zeee-zeee-zeee! screams the reel, as the tuna turns and makes a second terrific rush, after having attempted to overrun the line and take me

and not an inch of line had been gained, though I had reeled continuously, taking in twenty feet, to lose it by foot or yard. Now the tuna searched for the bottom of the deep blue channel; now came pumping upward, the line thrilling and vibrating like the chord of some musical instrument humming strange music. Nearer we went to the rocks. The



MR. J. H. WOODS FIGHTING A TUNA.

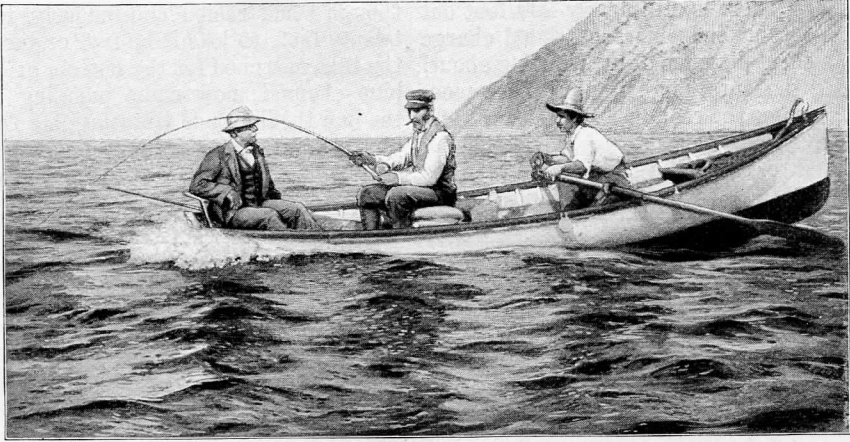
The fish finally got away after a struggle of more than fourteen hours, during which he dragged the boat thirty-five miles. Mr. Woods, nearly exhausted, gave up his rod to his boatman at the end of seven hours and twenty minutes. From a photograph by Swenson.

unawares. This time about 500 feet are lost before I can stop him, and once more I drop into the seat, almost exhausted. The slightest error of judgment, and the thread will break. The thumb must be pressed upon the brake just hard enough to check the line, and be so delicately adjusted that every plunge, rush, or action of the fish is met. But thirty members of the Tuna Club have landed a tuna of over one hundred pounds weight, the reason being demoralization caused by the action of the fish in the first five minutes.

The fish now towed the boat nearly a mile out to sea in one long rush, frequently surging downward with terrific force. Suddenly he stopped, whirled like a top, and came boiling in to the music of the reel, that I worked in desperation. Again he turned a short distance from the boat, and went hissing through the water, tearing off yards of line, until he was again 600 feet away, towing us inshore. Forty minutes had slipped by,

boatman's oars were in the water; and during all this time he had never taken his eyes from the tip of the rod, and was ever holding and rowing against the fish while the latter towed us—three men and a heavy boat. His object was to aid in tiring out the fish, in order that the contest might not be interminable. We were now so near the rocks and their beard of kelp that we feared the tuna was going to make for the kelp—an unusual movement. But no; the moment he realized that he was in the shallows, he turned and charged again; rushed round the boat in great circles; then towed us half a mile to sea; then plunged down and around in a frenzy of rage, again making splendid rushes, only to turn and charge.

For three hours this gamy tuna fought me and my boatman; then I turned him, and he swam nearly five miles down the coast, towing us home, being brought to gaff at the entrance of Avalon Bay, after a contest of four hours without cessation or rest. Time and



GIVING A TUNA THE BUTT IN THE EFFORT TO BRING HIM WITHIN REACH OF THE BOATMAN'S GAFF.

Drawn from a photograph by Swenson.

again, at the last, I had him within fifty feet of the boat, but could get him no nearer. My strength was beginning to wane, and I had almost concluded that he could not be brought alongside, when he suddenly displayed signs of surrender and began circling slowly around the boat. Only then did we fully realize the size of the fish. He swam doggedly along as I gave him the butt; the boatman slipped the steel gaff beneath the silvery under surface, and he was ours. Not yet! He flung his tail into the air, deluging us with water; shattered the gaff handle and jerked it from the boatman's hands, and was away. Again he was reeled in, and this time a heavier gaff impaled him. Then we stepped on to the gunwale of the boat, pressing her down to the water's edge, and slid the monster in, amid cheers from friends in a following launch.

Such was the record catch, the cup and medal catch, of the Tuna Club of 1898-99. The fish was about six feet in length, forty-three inches in girth, and weighed 183 pounds. In the summer of 1899, Colonel C. P. Morehouse of Pasadena took, in three hours, a much larger tuna, one weighing 251 pounds, that towed the boat eight or ten miles before he was gaffed. The fish made a desperate fight, towing the boat "Tunita" out into the channel, where she nearly filled in the heavy sea. The angler, a skilled wielder of the rod, who has caught tarpon and almost all the game fishes of this country, stated that the struggle for supremacy was the hardest he had ever been a party to; and, like all who have conquered large tunas, he was

much exhausted at the finish. A tuna of 175 pounds, taken by Mr. F. V. Rider, gave that veteran angler a contest he will long remember.

While the 251-pound tuna was the largest ever caught in these waters, much larger fish, undoubtedly, have been hooked and escaped. During the past season, a member of the Tuna Club, Mr. J. H. Woods, of Lima, Ohio, had an experience which attracted much attention among anglers. Many fishermen use light-power launches and move through the schools of tunas at a rapid rate, thus imitating as nearly as possible the speed and motion of the flying-fish as it rushes along. Mr. Woods was fishing in a trim launch run by Captain Harry Elms, when he had a strike that made the steel tongue of the great reel scream. The man at the reel was powerful; but he found it was almost impossible to check the run, and the mighty fish rushed on and on, dragging, jerking, pulling lengths of line, until nearly 1,000 feet were out. The engine had been pumping astern at full speed, and presently the launch was flying through the water, stern first, towed by the unseen steed with trace no bigger round than an eye-glass cord. Now began a contest that has no equal in the annals of rod-fishing. The tuna made directly out to sea, occasionally stopping to rush in or around the boat, then with great sweeps coursing off and circling, to dart down again into the blue channel, with a power so great that even the engine, when tried at half speed, made no impression on him.



WHEN THE TUNA IS HOOKED, THE OARS MUST SUPPLEMENT THE REEL TO KEEP PACE WITH HIS RUSHES.

Drawn from a photograph by Svenson.

The fish was hooked at four in the morning, and boats returning to Avalon at ten o'clock reported that Mr. Woods had been fast to a tuna for six hours, and that the fish was towing him out to sea. Knots of people began to gather at the fishing-stands, discussing the chances of the record being broken. Eleven, twelve, and one o'clock passed, and still nothing was heard of the launch, which was now out of sight. Mr. Woods had his wife and little boy with him, and as a sea had blown up, it was decided to send a launch with lunch and an offer of help. Never before had a fish played so long. The rescue party found the boat about seven miles out, lying in the trough of the sea, and the tuna still towing it offshore. Mr. Woods had now played the fish seven hours and twenty minutes, and, nearly exhausted, had at last surrendered, and passed the rod over to the boatman. He and his family went aboard the visiting launch, to return inshore; and the boatman, determined to bring in the fish, was left eight miles offshore, with lunch and water near at hand, and his gaff within easy reach behind him. It was then eight hours from the time of the strike, and the tuna remained apparently as fresh as ever.

The incident had created so much excitement that boatmen took advantage of it, and carried passengers out to observe the sport, and Captain Elms was soon surrounded by anglers and tourists, all anxious to see the end. But he had underestimated the fish. An hour passed, and another, and another,

until finally thirteen hours had slipped by, and the fish was still several hundred feet from the boat. Several times Elms brought him within fifty feet, and saw a blaze of silver on the surface that melted into the deep blue as the fish dived, taking several hundred feet of line. A heavy sea now came rolling down the channel with the afternoon wind, and thirteen hours and a half from the time of the strike, Elms began to gain inch upon inch, by holding the line when the boat dropped into the trough of the sea, and so lifting the fish. He continued this arduous work for half an hour, and could see that the tuna was nearly at the surface. To drop the rod and pick up the gaff was impossible. In a moment nine inches of the tail of the fish rose above the surface, and the observers saw that he was a giant indeed. A skilled angler from one of the other launches now went aboard to wield the gaff. Elms still held the rod, with thumb on the brake, ready to let go at the slightest rush. The gaffer attempted to reach the head of the fish, but the reach was too long, and the strike failed. The giant made a mighty surge, went down 200 feet like an arrow, and then Elms felt a peculiar twist. The tuna was free, after fourteen hours and twenty minutes of fighting. This ended the contest. Those who saw the tuna's tail and those who experienced his power are still wondering as to his size and weight. The following day the steamer that plies between the island and the mainland sighted a mighty tuna floating on the surface near this spot; presumably

it was the same fish. It was estimated at eight feet in length and to weigh 600 pounds. An eight-foot shark could have been landed in less than half an hour. So much for the power, strength, and fighting qualities of this tiger of the sea.

The tuna is an oceanic fish, which explains the fact that it is confined to the offshore islands in southern Californian waters. It is the largest of bony fishes, the *Thunnus thynnus* of science, and is known to attain

a weight of 1,500 pounds. In appearance it resembles a gigantic bonito, and is a near ally of this fish, claiming, with it, many of the beauties of form and color. The upper portion is a rich blue; the belly, silver; the finlets, a brilliant yellow. The dorsal fin fits into a complete sheath, and the shape of the fins and the general appearance of the fish indicate speed and untiring vigor, while its fighting qualities give it place among the great game of the world of sport.

A 251-pound tuna, the cup and medal winner, 1899, caught by C. P. Morehouse with rod and reel, at Catalina Island, California. From a photograph by Swenson.

